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ABSTRACT

Despite resistance from cultural separatists and essentialists, whites are increasingly teaching and studying ethnic literatures. A white African Americanist finds herself teaching African American literature to African Americans. In a first-year writing course she taught at Florida State University, she was the only white participant in a process writing course. The goal was to use an African American literature anthology to generate notebook entries, discussions, and paper topics. Her race had various impacts upon the students' writing and participation in class discussion and their evaluations of her and of the course varied as well. Four students said they would have preferred a black teacher, 25 others made encouraging comments. The following semester at the University of Southern Mississippi, the teacher taught her first African American literature course and had a better experience, at least in part because of the self-reflection the previous class generated, because the students were older, and because the class was more diverse. The challenges are numerous: introducing race as an appropriate and safe area for class discussion; and guiding students in establishing boundaries for safe discussions. (Contains a 10-item annotated bibliography.) (CR)

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Genevieve West

Trading Places: Becoming the "Other" in the Classroom

Despite resistance from cultural separatists and essentialists, whites, like my self, are increasingly teaching and studying ethnic literatures. Rather than entering the debate over whether whites *should* teach minority literatures, however, I assume that at some point each of us will teach the literature and students of a racial group of which we are not a member. My goal, then, is to provide teachers with questions for self-reflection and strategies for bridging racial differences in the classroom. As a white African Americanist I find myself teaching African American literature *to* African American students. Drawing largely from two groups of student surveys and from personal experience, I will reflect on the ways in which racial difference affects classroom dynamics and students' selection of writing topics as well as student's concerns and suggestions for addressing them. But perhaps most importantly, I want to address ways that we, as teachers, can positively use the tension that racial difference sometimes produces in the classroom.

The idea for this paper originated in a First-year Writing course I taught at Florida State University, where I suddenly found myself the "Other," the only white participant in a process writing course. The goal was to use an African American literature anthology to generate notebook entries, discussions and paper topics. Because the course was titled "Writing About the African American Experience," students clearly expected an African American instructor. I knew that the range of experience for other white teachers of similar courses at FSU ranged from stellar to agonizing. Based on what I had been told, I expected students to have questions about why I was teaching the course, but naively believed that one short discussion would open the door for meaningful exchanges. Although clearly not

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G. West

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an expert on the African American experience, I believed that as a writing teacher I could use African American literature to stimulate students to think and write about their own lives. Students, however, were not so sure.

Shortly after I had introduced myself and the syllabus, I asked for students' questions. A male student immediately put his hand in the air: "I don't want to sound rude," he said, "but what do you, a white woman, know about my experience?" Again, I tried to reiterate that it was a writing course. I was there as a facilitator for discussion and writing. But I was uncomfortable and could feel myself turning red; my obvious discomfort set the tone for the semester. Although the students turned in great writing and brought impressive projects to class, much more often than I would have liked, I found myself uneasy, feeling like an outsider, feeling deliberately tested, feeling like important ideas were left unsaid. But unsure of what to do, I did virtually nothing. My experience with Makeshia, for example, is telling. She wrote in her notebook that she had changed her paper topic because she was afraid I just wouldn't understand—because I was white. Did she expect for me to read the comment? I'm not sure. It was buried in a number of other writings. What I do know, however, is that it devastated me personally. I had tried so hard, I thought, to create an open atmosphere. Upset and afraid of saying the wrong thing, I opted to say nothing. But in doing so, I missed the opportunity to engage a student in an open discussion of racial and cultural difference. In retrospect, I think this discussion is what Makeshia, and many of the other students, wanted, perhaps needed.

Predictably, students' responses to the class were mixed. While seven students reported not questioning my motives for teaching the class, the remaining 22 did have strong initial reservations, in spite of the fact that I tried to address racial concerns the first day. The question of what I knew about their experiences came up

most often. Trenee and Latrice wondered if I were teaching the course just to put it on my resume or as "an experiment" with "lab animals." Valerie most strongly articulated the concerns of many: "I felt you wouldn't take [the course] as serious as a black person, who experienced these things like racism everyday of their life. To me it seemed as though this way of life (black culture) was just sort of entertainment, like an ongoing movie. We just dance around and live and you clap your hands in amazement."

My race also had various impacts upon the students' writing and participation in class discussion. The responses varied from feeling indifference, feeling the need to educate me, and feeling like they might offend me. Fifteen students reported that they had not censored themselves because of my race, but another nine said they had restricted their writings and/or class discussions, specifically because of my race. Robin said she did not want to "hurt [my] feelings." Trudi, too, said she had been "careful in order not to offend the teacher." As she pointed out, I, after all, was the one giving the grades. Valerie had another concern: "I felt that you weren't truly expressing your opinions, so why should I [?]" Interestingly, however, my race, had the opposite effect on other students. Brenda, Levar, and Trudi all said that because I was white, they pushed themselves to state their opinions more clearly, more forcefully. As Andrea explains, her writing was her "way of letting the white community see [her] personal views."

Their final evaluations of me and of the course varied as well. Four students explained that although they believed I had done a good job of teaching the course, they would have preferred and believed they would have learned more from a black teacher. As Makisha explained, "I thought she was a good teacher considering she was white, but I felt I would have learned more with a black teacher." Twenty-five of the students, however, made encouraging comments. Marjorie, for example,

when asked about her feelings toward my race at the end of the semester, said "I think the purpose of the this class wasn't for her to teach me but for the whole class to teach each other." DeeDee explained it this way: "Anybody of any race can teach a class, as long as they know what they are doing." Frederick put it this way, "I believe it was beneficial on my part and on her part. I learned some things about the white culture that I didn't know before and I'm sure that she did, but visa versa."

The following semester at the University of Southern Mississippi, I taught my first African American literature course and had a better experience, at least in part because of the self-reflection the previous class generated, because the students were older, and because the class was more diverse. Designed for upper level undergraduates and graduate students, this course focused on the Harlem Renaissance. Of the eighteen students enrolled, six were graduate students, five of whom were white. Of the remaining twelve undergraduates, seven were African American, of which only five completed the term. One stopped attending because of health problems, the other because of problems at home.

When I introduced my self and the course the first day, I didn't wait for questions about my race. I brought it up, asking, "Does anyone have questions or concerns about the fact that I'm a white woman and this is an African American literature class?" I saw faces smile, heads nod "yes," and hands timidly go up.

Seven of the twelve students who completed end of the semester surveys reported being surprised by the fact that I was white. Two of those students, both white, explained that their surprise turned to relief. Becky, an undergraduate said this: "I think in the beginning, because I am also white [your being white] made me feel as if I would be less discriminated against by other students who are African American. Silly? . . . . I expected some of them to be resentful to a white girl for taking an A[frican] A[merican] class." Gray, a graduate student, explained his

response this way, "I took a seminar in the African novel at [another university], and it was pretty clear that the instructor didn't like white people. So, in some small way, I guess I was relieved."

Two other students, one black female and one white male, came to different conclusions, however. Jay explained that "it would have been nice to have had an African American teaching the class because she could have brought personal experiences of the race to the interpretations." Dianne expressed a similar concern about my lack of personal experience with racism: "there were times when I was silent out of frustration, frustrated because no matter how hard I tried, the white students and teacher would never understand." Although she believed I had done "a really good job in teaching," she still felt it would have been "better taught by a black teacher." Faced with the choice, however, of a white teacher or "not having the course at all," she would choose and did choose "the white teacher."

Comments from several of these same students revealed another interesting racial dynamic. Although the African Americans students did not report feeling the need to monitor themselves, five of the white students did at times censor themselves for fear of offending. Becky "felt [she] lacked the first hand experience [the African American students] had with certain topics." Jenny made a similar observation: "I did feel at times that some of my classmates felt they were the only ones who could explain how authors were feeling."

As a whole, however, the evaluations for the course were quite good, as all of the students said they would recommend the course to friends. They enjoyed reading new texts and discovering new authors. I also found it satisfying that Becky could report, "I feel much more comfortable with many of my African American classmates." And yet, I was disturbed by what Dianne's response said that I failed to consider: the impact of gender as well as race. She wrote, "You being a white

woman deters black males from joining the class, it's not your fault and you have no control over it, but it is a fact."

I had never considered gender a factor, but believe now that gender both lends and denies credibility to my teaching. The experience of a fellow white colleague who was teaching African American literature for the first time illustrates my point. Her students, many of them women, immediately challenged her credibility as a teacher. What she learned at the end of the less than ideal semester was something of a shock. A female student explained, "if you had been a white man, we would have left." Her gender gave her an ounce of credibility with her black female students. Struggles with patriarchy give women, black and white, a tenuous, but common, tie, something we can build on, but what ties me to black men? Only my explicit efforts to bring them into classrooms can begin to bridge the gap.

What I have learned in the last two semesters? That the challenges are numerous. We all hear about racial conflict on the evening news, but we don't know how to talk about racial difference or racial conflict. And because whites don't want to be perceived as bigots, most opt to say nothing. It seems that regardless of the racial makeup of the classroom, someone feels silenced. So what can I do?

First, as a white woman, before I ever enter the classroom I must be committed to unflinching and ongoing self-examination. My apparent discomfort with talking about race, which probably stemmed from my own fear of "saying the wrong thing," made my composition students uncomfortable. They knew I was being less than forthcoming. By the time I reached my literature class, I had faced my own racial identity and felt better able to discuss who I am, what my values are, and why. The rapidly expanding discussion on whiteness provides an important

avenue for self exploration. Indeed, Lawrence and Tatum describe the examination of whiteness as necessary to establish "trust" between blacks and whites. Seeing my privilege is as important as seeing someone else's prejudice. Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of coming to see Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies" provides a stunning list of over-looked everyday white privileges.

Once in the classroom, there are several things I can also do as well. First, I need to introduce race as an appropriate and safe area for class discussion. By making myself, my race, the first text open for discussion, students are more likely to feel comfortable approaching the subject themselves. One important fact that my composition students taught me is that I need to return to race as a text. While discussing my race on the first day may encourage students to give me a chance, I cannot expect their questions to go away. I discovered during my Harlem Renaissance class, I also gave students the opportunity to write me anonymous letters during the third week of the semester. It gave them an opportunity to tell me how things were going, without fear of repercussions.

Second, I can guide my students in establishing boundaries for safe discussions. I prompt my students in creating their own, but often the list includes things like, "we don't talk when someone else does" and "we listen to ideas that differ from our own." While these two behaviors may be what we would normally expect from college students, articulating them lets the students know what to expect of each other. Holubec, Johnson, and Johnson in "Dealing with Conflict: A Structured Cooperative Controversy Procedure" suggest similar guidelines, what they call "Controversy Skill Rules."

Likewise, it's important that I not shy away from potential conflict, as I did in my composition course. Holubec, Johnson and Johnson point out: "Controversy

can be a positive experience which increases learning and improves student relationships, or it can be negative experience which closes off logical thought and damages relationships–it depends upon how it is handled." By choosing the "safe" thing, not to engage my composition students in more open discussions, I left their need to explore positionality unfulfilled.

It follows then that I can also work to challenge students from all ethnic groups to think about their positionality. Maher and Tetreault's "Learning in the Dark: How Assumptions of Whiteness Shape Classroom Knowledge," points out how accepting white norms as *the* norm marginalizes those typically described as "others." What I'm suggesting, though I am not sure if it is possible or how it might actually work, is rejecting white as the norm, especially in ethnically specific courses, so that we un-other the texts, so that we make the "minority" text the center. To do this we have to challenge white students to see themselves as a distinct racial group that benefits from structural and institutional biases. While Maher and Tetreault point out that when entering such territory the "path of discussion becomes bumpy and painful, . . . the critique of the relationship to oppression necessary to a positional understanding of Whiteness becomes possible."

When I asked my composition students what advice they "might offer white teachers of predominately minority students and/or of minority literatures." This is some of what they had to say:

- "Show [your students] respect and don't except (sic) anything less in return." Anonymous.
- "Watch out for ignorant students and don't get discouraged." Sareka.
- "Judge [your] students right. Not by their race but by their brains." Carlo.
- "Don't try to make it seem that you totally understand what it is like in black experiences, because really you don't." Anonymous.

- "Just be calm and be yourself. Do not try to (sic) hard to please the students because it would make you look like your (sic) kissing up." Kenneth.
- "[A]cknowledging that yes there is a difference between us is the first step to letting me know that you see me for who I am. I hate when people try to claim this color-blind junk." Valerie.
- "If you have knowledge of your field and are genuinely interested--GO FOR IT! Just don't expect to be accepted so quickly." Trudi.
- "THINK BLACK--try to envision yourself feeling filled with all existing emotions of a people." Lisa
- "Don't expect total cooperation and support at the beginning, it takes time." Frederick.

But regardless of whether students "approve" of my teaching African American literature I have come to believe that the most crucial tasks before me are to challenge students to enrich and complicate their thinking about the literature and about race, and to provide a safe forum where they can explore both.

Trading Places: Becoming the "Other"
M. Genevieve West
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